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FRENCH SOCIALISM TODAY

II. SYNDICALISM

I

Undoubtedly the most interesting phenomenon in French politico-economic life today is syndicalism. Syndicalism looks askance at parliamentary socialism. Syndicalism, taking its name from the *syndicate* or trade union, is revolutionary in character. It out-Marxes Marx, for while Marx said that the workers must unite and win as political units, Syndicalists say they must unite and win as economic units. It thus, in France, contemplates "emancipating" the workers independently of parliamentary institutions. It thereby gives the *coup de grace* to the pretensions of all the socialist parliamentarians, from the most rabid Guesdist to M. Bréton, who bewails the dissolution of the recent radical-social *bloc*.

In order to understand syndicalism it will be necessary to make a brief survey of recent labor union history. In 1884, Waldeck-Rousseau put through a fundamental law allowing labor unions to become *syndicates*, that is, to exercise a legal collective action in defense of the individual interests of their members. In 1886 various municipalities established Bourses du Travail, and soon a law limited the occupation of these bourses to the syndicates. Later, Charles Dupuy closed the bourses. After a time they were reopened and, when the need of help from the Socialists to settle the Dreyfus affair was urgent, radical governments gave them new and ever-increasing concessions. Millerand secured for employees of the state the privilege of joining unions and forming federations, while under Rouvier school teachers and postmen formed themselves into *syndicates*, some of which were affiliated nominally to the great syndicalist federations.

In 1895, at a syndicalist congress at Limoges, there was organized the Confédération Générale du Travail. In 1906 Victor Griffuelhes, in a report to the Congress of Amiens, gave the number of unions belonging to the Confédération Générale du

Travail as 2,399 with a membership of 203,273. These unions or *syndicates* are known as the "red *syndicates*." The others are the "yellow." The general strength of trade unionism in France at that time was put as follows:

Total number of trade unions in France	4,857
Number in Confédération Générale du Travail	2,399
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Difference	2,458
Number of workmen belonging to the trade unions	836,134
Number in Confédération Générale du Travail	203,273
	<hr/>
Difference	632,861

Thus the unionists belonging to the Confédération in 1906 represented scarcely one-quarter of the total number of trade-unionists in France. Then, too, it had yet to be seen whether the membership of the Confédération was revolutionary. The solidarity of the revolutionary group and the Confédération's rapid growth, as later figures show, coupled with the rapid diffusion of the revolutionary spirit, make it the most talked-of body today in the French trade-unionist world.

II

Revolutionists point to the preamble of the Confédération as proof that it has always been revolutionary. This preamble reads: "Only through this form of organization will the workers be able to struggle effectively against their oppressors and completely abolish the wage system." This statement has been pointed to, however, as no more than a pious hope, since it is only in the last ten years that the Confédération has really become actively militant.

Its activity as a revolutionary body dates back to the accession to power of M. Millerand. To the degree that his accession represented a Socialist's assumption of power, that accession destroyed the Confédération as a socialist group. For the seizing of power, even in part, by a Socialist raised fond and impossible hopes. These hopes were dashed when Millerand, called upon to choose between the interests of a group—the

Socialists—and the interests of the many groups which look to the government, chose to serve the latter. On that day the militants began to detach themselves from socialism and the Confédération received its first strong accession of revolutionary ardor. Distrust of the parliamentary method of achieving reforms had been engendered.

Nor has syndicalism lacked leaders. It found its greatest leader or teacher in Georges Sorel,³ the philosopher of revolutionary syndicalism. He has been aided by energetic disciples. Lagardelle, Griffuelhes, and Hervé are among the most prominent. Sorel is a pessimist. Like the Hebrew wise man he sees little new under the sun. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The revisionist movement, with its growing optimism and smoothing of the rough edges, depresses him. He seeks again the pristine purity of revolutionary, fighting reform. Hence his attitude really represents a renaissance of the revolutionary spirit of Marx. Not the form that Marx gave, be it noted, but the spirit. Marx aimed at fighting through parliament, Sorel has been disillusioned. The Socialists who enter the Chamber are like the sailors who came to the land of the Lotos eaters. In the Chamber a sense of the oppressions, the contumelies, the sufferings of the workers comes only faintly to them and there slumber seems more sweet than toil. True, the Socialist deputies agitate, they talk. But their speeches are "like a tale of little meaning though the words are strong." Therefore Sorel can see no good in parliamentary socialism.

Parliamentary Socialists cannot understand what the new school is aiming at. They imagine that all socialism resolves itself, in the last resort, into a search for the means of gaining power. Are the people of the new school (they ask) trying, perhaps, to make a higher bid in order to win the confidence of the simple electors and steal away the seats from the Socialists in possession? Does the new school wish to stir up civil wars? That seems a mad policy to our great statesmen. . . . An agitation, kept within limits, is exceedingly useful to the parliamentary Socialists, who boast to the government and the rich middle classes that they are able to

* Sorel's most important books are *The Future of the Syndicates*, *Reflections on Violence*, and *The Decomposition of Marxism*. He has also written on the ethics of socialism.

moderate the revolution. Then they can carry through successfully the financial affairs in which they are interested; they obtain small favors from many influential electors, and they get social measures passed through parliament in order to give themselves importance in the eyes of the noodles who suppose that these Socialists are great legislative reformers. In order that all this business may prosper, it is necessary that a little agitation should always be going on—just enough to frighten the middle classes.

In short, Sorel sees no likelihood that the form of socialism which is developed in parliamentary life will ever result in the emancipation of the workers. The central fact is the class struggle, carried on and waged remorselessly by the workers themselves. By that method and by no other will the laborers liberate themselves. Sorel is also opposed to the army, because the army is the visible manifestation of that force, the state, which keeps the workers in servitude. As a corollary he believes in the general strike because it is the clearest manifestation of the class struggle. It crystallizes the whole awakened consciousness of the worker. It is struggle in stark reality.

Sorel, too, holds aloof from the parties. He is a philosopher, not a politician. He presents syndicalism in its ethical aspect, to which he attributes an importance as essential as technical skill. To follow him, the Syndicalists ought to form an élite, imbued, as one writer says, with the moral austerity and belligerency of the Puritans. Sorel does not find this in political socialism, and for this reason he has broken with the dominating politicians, who, he believes, under color of democratic socialism, of democratic equality, aim only to reduce to servitude and to corrupt the working class with a view to perpetuating their own domination.

Lagardelle, on the other hand, is interested in the economic and political aspects of syndicalism. Lagardelle is the editor of the *Mouvement socialiste*. At the Toulouse Congress of the Unified Socialists in 1908 he stated his views:

Syndicalism does not aim at seizing the state, as the Socialists do, who think only of strengthening the state by reassuring to it all the monopolies, by concentrating in its hands all riches, by regulating production under the supervision of an army of officers. Quite the contrary. Syndicalism, far from nationalizing society, seeks to dissolve all bureaucratic centralization

and to federalize, to syndicalize all public services, to establish a new feudalism or economic unit [*école*] belonging to organized bodies of syndicalists, the postoffice to the postmen, the railway to the railway workers, the theaters to the actors, etc.

This, in general, is the constructive program of syndicalism. Other Syndicalists have worked out the details.

In brief, the syndicalist outline runs as follows:

The emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves. They must create their own organs; therefore, unions are to be used (*a*) as organizations of collective resistance, (*b*) as units of production and distribution. The unions are to meet after the triumph of the general strike. The union of each trade is to decide what production is necessary to meet the community's needs and make an equitable division of the work to be done, taking into account the strength and capacity of each workman and leaving him free to produce in accordance with the amount of energy he can summon.

To the federation is allotted the task of equalizing production and distribution throughout the country, with the co-operation of the labor exchange, which will assume any municipal functions retained. The Confédération will handle international exchange.

This is all naïvely precise and simple, but, with the state gone, just what is going to maintain harmony between the various organizations does not appear. Interpreted at its best the syndicalist ideal of organization appears to be that society ought to be organized on the basis of its natural units rather than on the basis of arbitrary political units, involving widely divergent interests, as at present.

Syndicalism does not contemplate deputed action. It believes in direct action, and in that alone. Syndicalism differs from socialism in its distrust of political action and in its emphasis on purely proletarian weapons and institutions. It differs from anarchism in that it appeals exclusively to the proletariat, and in that it has the constructive program outlined above.⁴

There are yet its tactics to be considered. Its chief weapon is the strike. These strikes are conducted with a relentless thoroughness probably unequaled in the history of labor. Chil-

⁴*Journal of Political Economy*, XVII, 133.

dren of the strikers are shipped to cities distant from the scene of strife so that they may not hinder the movement. The strikers are fed at communist kitchens. Both these measures have been found effective to promote aggressiveness. Further, they employ the boycott, also violence, or *sabotage*. In short, it is war, without any rules of warfare. The Syndicalists look to the time when all labor will be so organized and so unified that a general strike will achieve the revolution. Partly with this end in view, even the police and military are urged to become organized. Partial organization of other government employees has already been achieved.

Syndicalism, in short, is a vigorous, active movement among the labor unions. It aims to secure for these bodies national power through the medium of their own efforts as unions. It contemplates the overthrow of the present political institutions, as part and parcel of the bourgeois capitalistic system. To achieve this end, it relies on the complete organization of the workers and conceives of them, so organized, acting in unison and using economic modes of attack. It has worked up considerable revolutionary fervor and seems destined to play a rôle of increasing importance in the French political situation.

III

There remains to be shown how syndicalism and parliamentary socialism, having operated upon each other and having been developed under the stress of events, have modified each other.

In high politics trivial incidents sometimes appear to start great movements, or at least to bring them into light. In 1905 a press campaign in Germany was opened against a French expedition in Africa. This led to discussion in the French Chamber, and a secondary effect was the question raised of the spread of unpatriotic doctrines among the teachers. The teachers had formed *syndicates* and were propagating the idea of a strike among the conscripts; in this way they were undermining the sanctions of the state. The Chamber was gravely alarmed over the perils the doctrines involved. This feeling was strengthened as a result of a congress held at Rouen, in March

of that year, when it became evident that the revolutionary wing of the Socialist party, spurred on by M. Hervé, was gaining strength. Even the socialist deputies in the Chamber were looked upon with suspicion, as if they were tainted with anti-patriotism. Later, in April, occurred a strike of the porcelain workers at Limoges, and the prefect called out troops to maintain order. The workmen and soldiers clashed, and two workmen were wounded. In the interpellation that followed, the Chamber supported the government, so that Jaurès' protest was as futile as a rhetorical exercise.

The next significant incident was a strike of police officers at Lyons. Some officers were dismissed there. They had refused to serve because the rules of a pension fund organized in their behalf had been changed in a way prejudicial to their interests. A general strike followed, but the prefect put an end to the strike through the agency of regular troops. In the debate that inevitably followed, M. Rouvier made it clear that a strike of officials was not to be tolerated. The Chamber supported him 483 to 66. Thus once more it was shown that all the eloquence of the socialist deputies could not shake the strength of the government nor impede its actions.

These incidents are typical of many others. The general strike is tried, it fails, in many cases because the government is able to use its military or political organization to replace the strikers, to maintain order, or to protect strike-breakers. To this fact may be traced much of the anti-military bitterness of the workmen. It is this concrete phenomenon, demonstrated before their very eyes and at their expense, which impresses these laborers. Sorel sees and interprets the philosophy of it.

Another current of effects flows from these strikes. The strikers look to their parliamentary representatives to vindicate them, to get them out of jail when they get into jail, to prevent the government from employing troops against them, and in numberless petty ways to free them from trouble when they clash with the power of the state. The Syndicalists, in consequence of their social status, necessarily fail to realize the difficult position the parliamentary group finds itself in. Accordingly they

cannot see just why the parliamentarians should fail to assist them. They soon weary of listening to explanations. In the end they think parliamentary socialism is of no avail since it cannot help them in the time of need.

This train of thinking has a positive side also. The workers perceive that they must fall back upon their own organizations, must wield their own weapons. Now their chief weapon is the general strike, but this has repeatedly failed because the government checkmated them by using troops. So the Syndicalists see that they must meet this difficulty or continue to be beaten. Hence the attempt to organize the soldiers and the public officials into unions. Unionized, an integral part of the *Confédération*, if commanded to act against fellow-Syndicalists, they too would strike and thus completely tie up and paralyze industry and frustrate the purpose of the state.

This was the condition of affairs as early as 1905. In the Chamber the socialist group gradually became more detached and isolated than they were previously. That same year the anti-militarism of the bourses was discussed by the Chamber. The Socialists strove to show the identity of pacifism and anti-militarism. But when Jaurès was called upon to declare whether or not he repudiated the agitation of the anti-patriots he remained silent, and the honors of the debate lay with his opponent.

In the spring of 1906 there was much domestic confusion. In the Nord and the Pas-de-Calais there were miners' strikes. At Clermont-Ferrand there were strikes in the building trade. At Toulon there was a general strike; there were also strikes at Alais and Bordeaux. In all these centers the propagandists of the red syndicates were busy.

Just at this time there happened an event which gave point to the syndicalist propaganda. At Courrières occurred a terrific mine disaster which claimed 1,000 victims. The mining shares of this concern had gone up from 100 to 3,000 francs without any corresponding improvement in the condition of daily life—housing, schools, care for safety, and provision for old age. The agitators did not fail to make use of this. It was just in time to aid the *Confédération* in its general strike of May 1. Clémenceau,

alarmed, placed Paris under the protection of 50,000 troops. In the meantime the elections occurred. The result was as follows: 175 reactionaries, Nationalists, Conservatives, Republicans, or Progressivists; 340 Republicans of the Left, Radicals, and radical Socialists; and 75 Socialists (53 unified and 22 indefinite).

These figures were significant. For the first time the majority of the Left was large enough to be independent of a socialist alliance or a coalition with the right. France thus got a government independent of the Socialists, which means that the government was strengthened to deal with strikes and domestic disorder. But the Socialists also got an increased representation. There thus appeared to be an approach to that dividing into parties which has been termed the class struggle.

IV

Strike tactics meanwhile continued to be employed, and in 1907, before May 1, Clémenceau again had recourse to the national army. As usual an interpellation followed in which the parliamentary Socialists were defeated. The effect of this parliamentary ineffectiveness was crystallized in a motion at Amiens at the Confédération Congress. The motion read:

So far as the individual is concerned the C. G. T. affirms that the member of a union is entirely at liberty to participate, outside the union, in whatever movements correspond to his philosophical or political beliefs; it asks in return that he should not introduce within the union the opinions he professes beyond its confines. So far as the organization is concerned the Congress declares that, in order that syndicalism may attain its maximum effect, its economic action should be carried on directly against the employers, the federated organizations having as labor organizations nothing to do with parties and sects, which outside of its sphere are entirely at liberty to seek the transformation of society.

In brief, it there affirmed its self-sufficiency and left the parliamentary Socialists dangling in the air, in so far as it was concerned. Later in the year the Socialists under Jaurès passed a resolution recognizing two spheres of labor and inviting "all militants to do their best to dissipate misunderstandings between the C. G. T. and the Socialist party." The C. G. T. thus

appeared clearly in the eyes of all to be in the stronger position and able to neglect or to dictate terms to the parliamentary Socialists.

The year 1908 brought a series of strikes and clashes with the troops. In these the strikers lost ground and in the municipal elections the Socialists also showed losses. When the Socialists tried to force the assembling of the Chambers in connection with the labor troubles they could not secure sufficient signatures. *Vorwärts*, commenting, said that the Socialist party was evidently not regarded by many workers as representing the wishes of the proletariat, and that the French laborers appeared distrustful of parliamentary socialism.

One ray of light appeared amid these reverses, but it shone only upon the C. G. T. The C. G. T. was joined by the great miners' association, with its 25,000 members. It was also further strengthened by additions from among the government workers. This brought the membership up to 294,398 as compared with 203,273, two years before.

V

In October, 1908, the C. G. T. met at Marseilles in congress, and the Socialists a little later at Toulouse. The great question that was fought out at the Labor Congress was whether the revolutionary or the moderate group should control the organization. The Moderates had challenged the methods of the revolutionaries, and the battle was waged chiefly over the adoption of the report of the latter. Here the "reds" showed their strength. The Congress adopted the executive's report by a majority of 947 to 109. The method of voting in the C. G. T., which tends to give the predominance to the smaller units, was also attacked by the Moderates. In the C. G. T. it does not matter whether a *syndicate* has a handful of members or a thousand, the unit of representation is the *syndicate*. This is justified by the smaller and more revolutionary *syndicates*, on the principle that the strong ought not to crush the weak and that, further, the importance of a *syndicate* does not depend on the number of its members, but rather on the economic impor-

tance of their work—whether or not its members are capable of disorganizing the public service. By a majority of one-third it was determined to maintain the *status quo*.

On the question of anti-militarism the revolutionaries were also in the majority. The Hervéists were rampant. They declared that the worker had no country and that they recognized only two classes of enemies, workers and capitalists. The workers should be so instructed that they would respond to a declaration of war with the declaration of a general revolutionary strike. Thus the conservatives in the party were swamped and the C. G. T. must now be definitely considered as red.

The Unified Socialist Congress took place at Toulouse a few days later. The following comparison, instituted by M. Bourdeau, indicates the difference between the two groups:

Between the personnel of these two estates, what opposition, what contrast! At Marseilles were seated only workmen. Without doubt some "intellectuals," some syndicalists without *syndicates*, were agitating around the entrance [*coulisse*], perhaps even in the prompter's box. But the official members of the C. G. T. composed (typically) of a candymaker, two hair dressers, a baker, an electrician, a laborer, a metal worker, become agitators, journalists, officers of *syndicates*. On the other hand at Toulouse sat an aged professor of philosophy, an aged student of Stanislaus, an engineer, some doctors, some lawyers, some landowners, some bondholders, and, to be sure, some employees. For the members of the first group, the syndicalist, it is the life of the worker for every day that is at stake; for the second group, socialism is an opinion, a cause, an ideal of which their habits, their mode of existence are a forced denial. These are two worlds.

The same question which agitated the C. G. T. agitated the Socialist Congress also. What should be the attitude of the party to syndicalism? Guesde wished to eject the Syndicalists. Lagardelle defended them. Jaurès in the end "conciliated all theories and all tactics." His clever handling of the question probably saved the Unified party from a split. His motion recognized the validity both of syndicalism and of parliamentary socialism. His main contention was that the opposition of theory and tactics represents in the party only a simple division of labor, converging to the same final end. This was accepted

and passed with applause. After this motion the Guesdists and Syndicalists buried their feuds for the time being, and the congress concluded in amity.

The strong efforts made by M. Jaurès to keep the party together and in accord with syndicalism have not as yet been very fruitful in results. Syndicalism seems indisposed to join with any political body and seems to grow more revolutionary.

In 1909, because of various grievances, the postmen struck. At that time Jaurès' paper remained silent, while the anarchists hailed the strike of government officials as a step toward anarchism. Yvetot, a syndicalist leader, in Hervé's paper, *La Guerre Sociale*, applauded it as marking the beginning of the overthrow of both the Chamber ("a kennel of crouching dogs") and the Senate ("a hospital of parliamentary invalids"). In the second strike, which was really more revolutionary in character, Jaurès approved the declaration issued by the C. G. T. committee.

Meantime Hervé, who was recently sentenced to four years in jail because of his tampering with the conscripts, has broken away from the regular party and has formed the Socialist Labor party. Apparently neither the Unified Socialist party nor the C. G. T. was revolutionary enough for him.

VI

To sum up: The parliamentary Socialists since 1905 under Jaurès have attempted a middle position between Marxism and what is generally called revisionism. This position has been one of increasing embarrassment and ineffectiveness. On the one hand a new *bloc*, independent of the Socialists, has been formed to carry on the government. On the other hand the discontent of the labor unions at parliamentary ineffectiveness has crystallized under Sorel's thought, under the agitation of Hervé, Lagardelle, and other disciples, and under the unions' clashes with the powers of the state, until they look for the transformation of society to come about through the exercise of distinctively proletarian efforts. They seek even for the germ of the new organization in distinctively proletarian institutions, in the *syndicate*.

Within the Socialist party, though "unified" in 1905, there

have been sects—Opportunists, Marxists, and Syndicalists—at issue with one another in a covert sort of way. The pressure of outside forces does not appear to have welded these into closer combinations, but rather has increased the tendency of the party to disintegrate. Socialists of a practical temperament like Millerand, Briand, and Vivani, have left the party. Syndicalists like Lagardelle, Hervé, and Griffuelhes are tempted to work rather with the C. G. T., while the little Guesdist or Marxian faction, having learned nothing and forgotten nothing, remains in isolation and disesteem.

Meanwhile syndicalism, closely bound up with the economic conditions of the workers, and either avowedly indoctrinated with the views of Sorel, or having these views for a subconscious background, seems to be gaining ground rapidly. It can point to many successful strikes, while its very activity draws to it workers and agitators. How far it will go is a question not to be answered lightly. In actual count the C. G. T. numbers only about 300,000 out of 900,000 unionists out of, in turn, 9,000,000 French workmen. There is room yet, therefore, for the jibe that it is merely “the minority of a minority,” but its rapid growth robs the taunt of its sting.

The idea of a general strike, which Sorel considers the very essence of revolutionary socialism, has not gained much ground outside of France. It appears probable, however, that, before it gets its quietus in France or indeed attains its end, there will be a vast deal of growth achieved and many ambitious strikes begun. Until then its validity, as far as France is concerned, cannot be successfully impugned in the minds of its champions. We may, therefore, conclude that the future will see its spread to a wider field than it has yet occupied. As a corollary, it may be inferred that in its progress it will sap the life from the parliamentary group. Hence, while constructive in itself, it will tend to discredit, in the name of a reinterpreted Marx, the very method of attack which Marx conceived as the best.

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